

Rhetorical Questions

Through a Hoop With Arafat

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Yasser Arafat gave us a lesson in the symbolic importance of language last week simply by pronouncing the words required of him.

Following a flubbed public performance on Tuesday, Arafat, in his successful retake on Wednesday, uttered what one commentator called "magic words," and what one of the unofficial American negotiators involved in the process called "talismanic words." Arafat renounced terrorism, embraced the germane U.N. resolutions concerning the Middle East and accepted Israel's right to exist, and he did so in the required word order and with the appropriate English-language nuance (which he could capture by doing it in English).

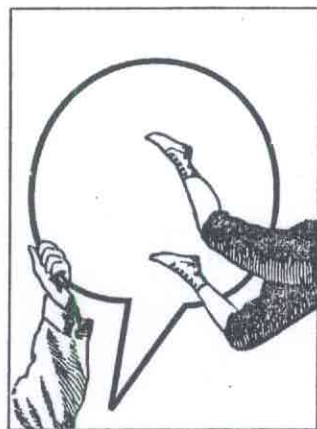
However significant—or otherwise—the political fallout of this meticulously scripted event may be, the process at work was fascinating even by the standards of diplomatic ritual. Something was on display in Geneva that is even more bizarre than the verbal quadrille Embassy Row dances daily: an oddity of the American political culture we can call The Rhetorical Hoop.

Rhetorical hoops, as we know them in the United States, always form under similar conditions: A prominent politician sins in the face of public opinion, and suffers for it in the popularity polls. Sometimes the figure involved has actually behaved shamefully or immorally, but often he or she has simply fallen short of the public image, however fictitious, that was previously enjoyed. Other political cultures resolve these matters when the sinning politician resigns or fires someone else, but never mind them for now.

What is required in the United States, if a politician is to save his political neck, is that he submit himself to the onslaught of public outrage: He must jump publicly

through a rhetorical hoop, confessing—in the words his audience anticipates—that his policies or actions have been mistaken, or that he has otherwise been an ass. He need not even apologize for his misdeeds; confession alone seems good for the American political soul.

The biggest such hoop of recent years was easily the "Okay, So Mistakes Were Made" hoop that Ronald Reagan finally had to jump through in the course of the Iran-contra mess. In fact, the question of whether Reagan would ever admit that something untoward had happened under his nose threatened, for a time, to



overwhelm the question of just what it was that actually did happen, and how. Furthermore, once Reagan threw himself through that hoop—acknowledging both the passive occurrence of mistakes, and also that he finally understood how some people even thought he had swapped arms for hostages—the fever pitch that the scandal had reached actually abated.

Another such hoop was set up in front of Michael S. Dukakis during the recent presidential campaign: the "I Admit It, I Am a Liberal" hoop. Dukakis, you may already have forgotten (and if so, understandably), tried mightily to avoid the liberal label throughout

the campaign, no matter how many times evidence was offered him that he seemed awfully like one. When, in the campaign's waning days, Dukakis finally uttered the line that awaited him and called himself a liberal, the matter had grown to such proportions that his hoop-jumping, made banner headlines. But then, that's the nature of a domestic Rhetorical Hoop-jump; it is scripted by circumstance, it fails to address the larger issues that are invariably at hand, and it is nonetheless perceived to be of enormous importance.

Arafat's Geneva statement adds an unusual dimension to the phenomenon, and not only because the bloody and emotional conflict in which he is involved transcends mere politics. The international hoop is rarely attempted, even more rarely successfully. Kurt Waldheim, for example, has steadfastly refused to jump through the "I Lied" hoop that has awaited him for years. Normally, it isn't even an option. Foreign leaders, even when caught in a scandal—much less when they are asked to abandon everything they have stood for—prefer to leave their positions and let their successors clean up the old problems or pursue new policies.

But then that's the scenario when they are playing on their own field and by their own rules. Arafat's actions in Geneva make the most sense when one considers them a response not merely to our State Department, but to our political culture as well. The Palestine Liberation Organization has evidently concluded that it can advance its cause by appealing directly to American public opinion. In an age when satellites allow foreign spokesmen to go routinely past the U.S. government and directly before the U.S. television audience, we have already seen—and may expect to see many more—foreign leaders behaving like American ones, and speaking their language.